

Sūrah Alam Nashrah

Central Theme and Relation with Previous Sūrah

This *sūrah*, along with Sūrah Ḍuḥā, the previous *sūrah*, forms a pair. It begins after Sūrah Ḍuḥā without any prior introduction, and the subject discussed in the verse: "Did We not find you an orphan and gave you shelter" (93:6) and in the subsequent verses of the previous *sūrah* is brought to completion in this *sūrah*. The only difference it seems is that in Sūrah Ḍuḥā the bounties and blessings of the Almighty, cited in order to comfort and assure the Prophet (sws), belonged to the period prior to his Prophethood and to that extending a little after it; whereas, in this *sūrah*, the favours which were showered by the gracious Lord on him when the message of Islam had spread in other parts of the Arabian peninsula are pointed out.

In the previous *sūrah*, the Prophet (sws) is given the glad tidings of a bright future as far as the extent of the propagation of the Islamic thought was concerned. This would overshadow the bleak present. The difficulties and hardships which he is facing are, according to the law of providence, only meant to train and discipline him. He would soon be relieved of them. In this *sūrah*, by making a reference to some such predictions which by then had shown clear signs to materialize, an emphatic assurance is given to the Prophet (sws). He is comforted that all his troubles and grievances will continue to give way to the happiness of success if he faces them with courage and determination.

Analysis of the Sūrah's Meanings

There is no ambiguity in the meanings of the *sūrah*. Initially a reference is made to the gift of *sharḥ-i ṣadr*, (inner satisfaction) which the Almighty had blessed the Prophet (sws) with in order to alleviate his mental worries. The Prophet (sws) is then consoled and solaced that just as in earlier times, every hardship was succeeded by ease and comfort, likewise, in the subsequent stages of this mission, the same pattern would continue. After this, an indication is made to the final phase of the completion of this mission with a mention of the method to benefit from its successes and triumphs.

Meaning of the Sūrah

أَلَمْ نَشْرَحْ لَكَ صَدْرَكَ (١) وَوَضَعْنَا عَنْكَ وِزْرَكَ (٢) الَّذِي أَنْقَضَ ظَهْرَكَ (٣) وَرَفَعْنَا لَكَ ذِكْرَكَ (٤) فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا (٥) إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا (٦) فَإِذَا فَرَغْتَ فَانصَبْ (٧) وَإِلَى رَبِّكَ فَارْغَبْ (٨)

Have We not opened your heart, and relieved you of the burden which weighed down heavily on your back, and raised your voice? (1-4)

So, with every difficulty there is relief; indeed, with every difficulty there is relief. (5-6)

Therefore, when your task is over, prepare yourself and with fervour seek your Lord. (7-8)

Explanation of the Sūrah

أَلَمْ نَشْرَحْ لَكَ صَدْرَكَ (١) وَوَضَعْنَا عَنْكَ وِزْرَكَ (٢)¹

In the explanation of the previous *sūrah*, a detailed account of the mental worries and anxieties which the Prophet (sws) had been facing in the early period is given. In the period just before prophethood, these worries were a result of his wanderings in quest for the truth, while in the early period of prophethood they were caused by a scarcity of followers and supporters of the religion he had begun to preach. Also a bright future, better than the past and present, with regard to the acceptance of his message was predicted with the assurance that the difficulties he was encountering were only transient in nature and the Almighty would soon relieve him of their burden. Later on, when divine revelations had appeased his apprehensions and the truth was exposed to educate and further encourage him, the Almighty revealed His unchanging law of trial which every inviter towards virtue faces if he is to succeed in his mission. The law is in fact the real subject of the *sūrah* and is stated near its end in verses five and six: “With every difficulty there is relief.”

To open someone's heart means to create in him a correct comprehension of the truth which is the outcome of true belief. This is also a means to develop in a person trust and faith in God, which is the fountain head of resolve and determination. With such a strong faith no impediment, however great it may be, can waver his stand and without it not even an impediment is needed to defeat his will.

The sentence وَوَضَعْنَا عَنْكَ وِزْرَكَ (and have We not relieved you of your burden?) is co-ordinated in meaning with the first, and hence is translated keeping in view that the interrogative particle أَلَمْ (Is it not

1. Have We not opened your heart and relieved you of the burden?

that...) of the first verse governs this second verse also. In Sūrah Nabā also, this style is adopted.

الَّذِي أَنْقَضَ ظَهْرَكَ (٣)²

This verse qualifies the word وَزْرٌ (burden) stated in the previous verse. By وَزْرٌ is implied the severe perplexity the Prophet (sws) was in when, prior to his prophethood, he was seeking the truth but to no avail. Later, when the Almighty revealed it to him his troubles merely changed shape as all his people turned against him.

There is no overstatement in the fact that the Prophet's troubles were breaking his back. The way the Almighty had provided him with guidance quite naturally induced him to think that if one soul was able to appreciate and understand it why was it that others were finding a difficulty in accepting it. Moreover, he saw that the more effort he made in calling them towards it, the more they evaded his calls. As result, he was driven into thinking that probably his efforts were lacking both in approach and intensity since the desired results were not being produced. This led him to double his efforts, but when even then the situation did not change, his worries increased twofold. Furthermore, if in these circumstances a delay occurred in between revelations then, again such a deference multiplied his worries, making him think that the real cause of the delay might be the Almighty's displeasure. To remove all these fears and to comfort and encourage the Prophet (sws), this sūrah was revealed. In Sūrah Tāha, also, the Prophet (sws) is assured in a similar manner:

طه مَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْقُرْآنَ لِتَشْقَىٰ إِلَّا تَذَكُّرٌ لِّمَنْ يَخْشَىٰ (٢٠:١-٣)

This is Sūrah Tāhā. We have not revealed the Qur'ān upon you to distress you. It is only an admonition for the God fearing. (20:1-3)

وَرَفَعْنَا لَكَ ذِكْرَكَ (٤)³

This simply comforts the Prophet (sws) by asserting that his once feeble voice has now become a reverberating roar. The word لَكَ (for you [only]), as in the first verse, expresses the exclusive nature of help provided by the Almighty to the Prophet (sws).

The verse also helps us in ascertaining the time of revelation of the sūrah as when the message of Islam had penetrated in the surrounding areas of Arabia. It should be borne in mind that the leaders of the Quraysh,

2. Which weighed down heavily on your back?

3. And raised your voice?

who were the first invitees of this religion, persisted in opposing it. However, during *hajj*, the pilgrims who came to Ka'bah became a constant source of spreading its teachings in the whereabouts of Makkah, particularly among the Anṣār of Madīnah. Subsequently, it reached the far flung areas of Arabia and then infiltrated into other countries. Such was the extent of its tide that it was not difficult for someone to imagine that this voice was not to be silenced and soon a hitherto feeble call would become a deafening uproar and that before long every nook and corner of Arabia would resound with the cries of Allāhu Akbar.

فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا (٥) إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا (٦)⁴

This is the real lesson which is meant to be given in the light of the above mentioned references, and which actually is the central theme of the *sūrah*. The Prophet (sws) is addressed and asked to ponder over the persistence of the Almighty during the course of his mission. When he has witnessed that every hardship is followed by relief, then he should bear all afflictions with patience, for only after passing through such trying circumstances would he taste the fruit of success. In the previous *sūrah*, the consistency in application of this law of trial is proven by citing examples both from natural surroundings and from some experiences from the Prophet's life, while in this *sūrah*, only some experiences of the Prophet's life are included to demonstrate the law and make the matter more effective.

An important aspect that should be kept in mind is that the verses are not repeated merely to emphasise the point, as most commentators contend. The repetition only stresses that difficulty and ease co-exist and follow each other in an eternally periodic sequence. After surmounting one peak no one should rest assured that his remaining life would be spent on a smooth terrain. In fact, a series of such peaks might have to be overcome if he has to succeed in life. He should always be prepared to scale every summit that comes his way -- for life is the name of a relentless struggle. Every passenger of this journey must brave the storm of its vicissitudes if he is to reach his destination. The Almighty has decreed the same law for those who tread the path of truth. Those who intend to trudge through it will have to make their own way and struggle through every inch they trek. But the Almighty has guaranteed one thing: if in spite of all these obstacles and hindrances they remain steadfast, muster all their strength to combat every test they are put through, He

4. So, with every difficulty there is relief; indeed, with every difficulty there is relief.

shall bring ease after every difficulty, and reinvigorate them to continue this remorseless journey till the ultimate destination is reached.

The philosophy behind this test has at many instances been stated in the Qur'ān. By its means, the Almighty discriminates between the righteous and the hypocrites and the believers from the disbelievers so that everyone can be rewarded or punished according to his deeds, and that no one is able to complain that he was the victim of injustice. Without this test the good cannot be distinguished from the evil to the extent that no one is able to refute the fate he deserves.

فَإِذَا فَرَغْتَ فَانصَبْ (٧) وَإِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَارْغَبْ (٨)⁵

This verse directs the Prophet (sws) to prepare for the ultimate destination. The verb *نَصَبَ* means “to prepare” and “to work hard”. The Prophet (sws) is told that after he successfully overcomes the obstacles which come in way of the mission, and when the Almighty showers His help, and when Makkah is conquered once again and when the enemies are humbled once and for all and when the people embrace Islam in large numbers, he should totally converge all his efforts and turn all his attentions to earnestly seek the Almighty. In other words, two aspects are highlighted in these verses: First, they bring glad tidings to the Prophet (sws) that he shall soon successfully complete his mission. Second, they assert that even after accomplishing the mission he should continue with more fervour, and direct all his energies and efforts in seeking the Almighty and prepare for the final journey which will bring him to the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

In complying with this final directive, the Prophet (sws) began to spend more and more time in worship. Such was the extent of his involvement that some people even inquired from him the reason for taking so much pains in worship when all his sins had been forgiven. The Prophet (sws) is said to have replied: “Should not I become a grateful servant of my Lord.” In Sūrah Naṣr, an elaborate treatment is given to this topic:

إِذَا جَاءَ نَصْرُ اللَّهِ وَالْفَتْحُ وَرَأَيْتَ النَّاسَ يَدْخُلُونَ فِي دِينِ اللَّهِ أَفْوَاجًا فَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ وَاسْتَغْفِرْهُ إِنَّهُ كَانَ تَوَّابًا (١١٠: ٣-١)

When comes the help of God and victory and you see men embrace the religion of God in multitudes, celebrate the praises of your Lord and seek His forgiveness. He is ever disposed to mercy. (110: 1-3)

5. So, when your task is over, prepare yourself and with fervour seek your Lord.